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Author(s)	KUWABARA, Tsukasa; YAMAGUCHI, Kenichi
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# An Introduction to the Sociological Perspective of Symbolic Interactionism: Herbert Blumer's Perspective Revisited

Tsukasa Kuwabara (Associate Professor at Kagoshima University)

Kenichi Yamaguchi (Graduate Student at Tohoku University)

## Abstract<sup>1)</sup>

The main purpose of this paper is to examine the theory of Symbolic Interactionism formulated by H.G.Blumer, from the following viewpoints;

- 1) How does Symbolic Interactionism understand "socialization" ?
- 2) How does Symbolic Interactionism understand "Vergesellschaftung" (Simmel, G.) ?
- 3) Why must human society be understood as "a changeable process" ?

As the result of our examining, the next things have been clarified;

1) Blumer thinks of "socialization" as the process in which the two "frameworks" ("schemes of definition" and "generalized roles") that have been acquired by an actor through interactions with "groups of others", guide his/her interpretations/definitions.

2) In Blumer's theory, "Society" is seen to be possible only when each of the actors in interactions can grasp properly the two "standpoints" ("standpoint of the other" and "one's own standpoint in the eyes of the other") through doing a kind of self-interaction (i.e., "taking into account of taking into account").

3) Because of the nature of "others" ("black boxness"), all the actors interacting with others are seen to be necessarily forced to revise their interpretations/definitions continually. This is the reason why the "society" has to be understood as "a changeable process".

Finally, we have tried to review critically the research method of Symbolic Interactionism (i.e., the approach from the "standpoint of the actor"), based on the conception of man and society that has been clarified in the earlier chapters of this paper. As the result of our reviewing, the next two points have been proved. That is; 4) in doing the approach from the "standpoint of the actor", only an "individual" can be included in the category of "actor", and 5) the "standpoint of the actor" grasped by researchers must never be seen as the standpoint *in the raw*, but have to be seen as a kind of *reconstruction of constructions* created by the researchers. We finally have confirmed that to test this conception of man and society empirically, based on the points (4 and 5) would (and must) be one of our important tasks in future.

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<sup>1)</sup> This article is an English version of the next paper;

**Kuwabara, T., 2006a, The Essence of Symbolic Interactionism: The Material Edition, Discussion Papers In Economics and Sociology (ISSN:1347-085X), No.0601, The Economic Society of Kagoshima University, from 7<sup>th</sup> page to 11<sup>th</sup> page**

**=Tohoku University, 2000, Hakase Gakui Ronbun: Naiyou No Youshi Oyobi Shinsa Kekka No Youshi(Bungaku/ Dai 11 Shu~/ Heisei 11 Nendo Jyuyo), Tohoku University44th, pp.248-259.**

**=Kuwabara, T., 2001, Introduction to a sociological perspective of Symbolic Interactionism (3) (The Summary of a doctoral dissertation, Tohoku University), KEIZAIGAKU-RONSHU~ OF KAGOSHIMA UNIVERSITY (ISSN:0389-0104), No.54, The Economic Society of Kagoshima University, pp.69-86 (=http://book.geocities.jp/blumer1970/ptsd.htm).**

**=Kuwabara, T., 2005, The Essence of Symbolic Interactionism, Discussion Papers In Economics and Sociology (ISSN:1347-085X), No.0501, The Economic Society of Kagoshima University.**

**=Kuwabara, T., 2006b, The Essence of Symbolic Interactionism: Blumer's Theory Revisited, Nakano, M., (ed.), Gendai Shakai Ni Okeru Shikago Gakuha Shakaigaku No Ouyou Kanousei, Heisei 14 Nen- 17 Nendo, The Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS), Research Reports for Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research(Kiban Kenkyu~ B), No.14310079, pp.157-164].**

**“It is too early for the final assessment of Blumer’s works. That will have to wait until the twenty-first century, when future historians will be able to see what remains of current sociology. It seems likely that many of his views will prevail.”**

**Quoted from Shibutani, T., 1988, Herbert Blumer’s Contribution to Twentieth-Century Sociology, *Symbolic Interaction*, 11:23-31.**

It is well known that the Chicago School of Symbolic Interactionism (hereafter abbreviated as “SI”), in which the works of Herbert Blumer (Blumer, Herbert George, 1900-1987) are representative, played an important part in the “Chicago Renaissance”. It was critical of both Structural-Functionalism, as established by T. Parsons and his followers, and Sociological Positivism (or Operationalism), in which G.A. Lundberg was a central figure, and tried to develop an alternative sociological perspective or conceptual framework and a new and appropriate research methodology. SI’s emphasis on the conceptual understanding of “the Dynamic Society” has been influential in the Japanese sociological community. “The Dynamic Society” as a concept characterizes human society as constantly constructed and reconstructed by “active individuals”<sup>2)</sup> (Mamoru Funatsu), or as constantly in the process of change.

This article [=Kuwabara, T., Introduction to a sociological perspective of Symbolic Interactionism (1)(2), *KEIZAIGAKU-RONSHU~ OF KAGOSHIMA UNIVERSITY (ISSN:0389-0104)*, No.52-53, The Economic Society of Kagoshima University=<http://space.geocities.jp/issn03890104no54/dissertation.htm>] examines the conceptual status of “the Dynamic Society” from the standpoint of a fundamental problem in sociology, namely, that of the relationship between individual and society. More specifically, we attempt to answer the following three questions in terms of the theory of SI:

- 1) How does SI understand “socialization”?
- 2) How does SI understand “Vergesellschaftung” (Simmel, G.)?
- 3) Why must human society be understood as “in process of change” in SI analysis?

Thus, the intention of this article is to solve a fundamental sociological problem, that of how the relationship between individual and society should be understood, from the perspective of SI. Previous studies of SI by sociologists in Japan have given insufficient attention to this problem, which is a key issue in the theory of SI.

It is important that the three questions above should be answered with the focus on a central concept of SI, “self-interaction” or “interaction with oneself”. Thus, it can be said that we have to solve a basic problem of sociology by focusing on the concept of “self-interaction”.

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<sup>2)</sup> Funatsu, M., 1976, *Symbolic Interactionism*, Kouseisha Kouseikaku.

In chapter one, we attempt to answer the first question of what “socialization” means in SI. Also, it is clarified how SI understands “the relationship between individual and world” and “action”. In SI, “self-interaction” is defined as the process whereby an actor interacts with him/herself, or a form of communication whereby an actor talks and responds to him/herself. That is to say, self-interaction is an internalized equivalent of social interaction with “others”. Self-interaction is a form of social interaction, which usually involves other people, but carried on alone.

From the perspective of SI, self-interaction is synonymous with “the process of interpretation”, which has two distinct steps: first, the actor indicates a set of “things” which carry meanings for him/herself (the step of “indication”), and second, he/she interprets these meanings by selecting, checking, suspending, regrouping, and transforming them in the light of both the situation in which he/she is placed and the direction of his/her action (the step of “interpretation”).

It has been argued that the theorization of “self-interaction” in SI does not differ from “subjective nominalism”, which proposes that autonomous individuals function in society while never becoming a product of that society. This criticism has long been made by a number of sociologists, for example, such as J.D.Lewis. His argument is particularly worth noting now. The first chapter of this article includes a counterargument to J.D.Lewis's criticism.

Given “self-interaction” as the central concept, “socialization” in SI is the process whereby:

- 1) An actor derives “schemes of definition” and “generalized roles” from “groups of others” to which he/she belongs.
- 2) The actor's interpretation/definition during social interactions in which he/she is participating is guided by these two frameworks, i.e. the “schemes of definition” and “generalized roles”, which he/she has derived from “groups of others”.
- 3) “Schemes of definition” serve to canalize an individual's social actions during social interactions with others, and “generalized roles” serve to canalize the individual's actions in self-interactions or interactions with oneself.

Thus, “interpretation/definition” is understood as the following process: (a) the acquisition of “generalized roles,” (b) the acquisition of “schemes of definition,” (c) the scrutiny of “schemes of definition” through self-interaction, which is guided by “generalized roles”, and (d) perception of the environment using the new “schemes of definition” resulting from the scrutiny in step (c). This is a social phenomenon which is called “conferring of meaning” in SI. The environment, as in (d), above, is called the “world of reality” (= the “social and physical sphere”).

SI conceives of “human beings” as existences surrounded by an environment, which is composed of a variety of “things”. The “world” is created by human beings through making “objects” for him/herself from the world of reality by means of the act of “conferring of meaning”. In SI, this act is understood as synonymous with perception as organized by “perspectives” (i.e. “schemes of definitio-

n” and “generalized roles”). So, an object is conceived as a portion or an aspect of the world of reality, which a human being has created via his/her perspectives. SI divides objects into three categories: “physical objects”, “social objects” and “abstract objects”.

The “world” for any human being is an area consisting only of these objects. Human beings are understood as entities living within such worlds. Hence SI proposes that “relationship between individual and world” is established by the interpretation/definition (=“conferring of meaning” or “perception”) of the world of reality by human beings via successive processes of self-interaction.

However, SI has never considered this “relationship” to be “fixed” only by the one-sided interpretation of an actor. According to SI, the world of reality that is to be interpreted by an individual is capable of “talking back” to his/her interpretation/definition, even the individual does not sure whether his/her interpretations have validity, he/she can judge the validity of definitions from this “talking back”. If the interpretations prove to be invalid, they are then modified. Thus in SI “the relationship between individual and world” must be understood as the relationship with a capability of being formed and re-formed from moment to moment through constant interaction/interplay between interpretation/definition by an actor and talking back from the world of reality. Hence, this relationship, in SI, must not be considered to be fixed only by the one-sided interpretation of the actor.

Keeping the point of “relationship between individual and world” in mind, let us try to clarify the concept of “action”--“an individual act”-- in SI. In SI, first and foremost, an action is understood as an activity of “fitting” or “adjusting” by an actor against the world of reality. As a result of this activity, the relationship between individual and world is forced to be formed and re-formed from moment to moment, in the wake of talking back from the world of reality. SI conceptualizes this process as a sequence of units consisting of: 1) “impulse”, 2) “perception”, 3) “manipulation”, 4) “consummation”. This is not, of course, terminated after just one cycle, but is a perpetual cycling of the four units, as in, 1) “*impulse*”, 2) “*perception*”, 3) “*manipulation*”, 4) “*consummation*”, 5) “*impulse*”, 6) “*perception*”, 7) “*manipulation*”, 8) “*consummation*”, ..... → n) “*impulse*”, and so on.

In chapter two, we attempt to answer the second question, as to how actors are constructing a society. SI explains social interaction as a mutual presentation or an interconversion of actions by actors. SI classifies social interactions into two categories, i.e., “symbolic interaction” and “non-symbolic interaction”. The former is mediated by self-interaction, the latter is not. It has been thought that symbolic interaction is the equivalent of “the use of significant symbols”, in Mead’s terminology, and that non-symbolic interaction is the equivalent of Mead’s “conversation of gestures”. However, the greater precision of our analysis on SI demonstrates the existence of at least two types of *symbolic interaction*, distinctly different from each other:

<sup>3)</sup> Logically speaking, “Gestures” in G.H. Mead’s terminology must be included in the category of this concept (“social object”). So, from the perspective of SI, the “meanings” of “gestures” are also understood as social products. This view of “meanings” is equivalent to the view of “meanings” in Mead’s theory of social interactions.

symbolic interaction in which a significant symbol does not yet exist but participants in the interaction are trying to call a significant symbol into being, and symbolic interaction mediated by significant symbols called into being by participants in a preceding interaction (=“use of significant symbols”). The latter is called “a real form of interaction”. In SI, “society” or “human society” is understood as “a real form of interaction”, and this type of interaction is called “joint action” or “transaction”. Therefore, “joint action (or transaction)” is in fact the real form of interaction that is equivalent to “use of significant symbols”.

“Human society” is conceptualized as joint actions closely interlinked with each other “in a timeline and in space” (or in other words, diachronically and synchronically). “Joint action represents not only a horizontal linkage, so to speak, of the activities of the participants, but also a vertical linkage with the previous joint action”<sup>4)</sup>. Joint action, thus, is “the fundamental unit of society. Its analysis, accordingly, lays bare the generic nature of society”<sup>5)</sup>.

Joint action is formed through symbolic interaction. That is, interactants construct the real form of interaction through symbolic interaction. In SI, symbolic interaction is formulated as a presentation of “gesture” and a response to the meaning of the gesture. The meaning of the gesture has three components: it signifies what an interactant who is presenting the gesture plans to do, what another interactant to whom the gesture is directed is to do, and the form of joint action that is to emerge from the articulation of the acts of the interactants. A state of “mutual understanding” occurs when the gesture has the same meaning for both interactants, the one who has presented the gesture and the other to whom it has been addressed. In this situation, “a significant symbol” or “a common definition” is shared by the interactants, and the terms “a significant symbol”, and “a common definition”, indicate that each interactant is “conferring” the *same* meaning on the gesture, through their individual processes of self-interaction.

Joint action can take place only when a significant symbol or a common definition exists among interactants. In turn, “a common definition” can exist only when each interactant performs a process called “taking into account of taking into account”--a form of self-interaction. As a result of this process, they are able to grasp properly (=interpret properly) the “standpoint of the other” and “one’s own standpoint in the eyes of the other”. SI proposes that for interactants, a proper grasp of these two “standpoints” is possible only if interpretations/definitions are directed by interpretive instruments, i.e., *perspectives* (=“schemes of definition” and “generalized roles”). The interactants have *already* obtained such perspectives from “groups of others”. And, from the SI perspective, only in the presence of a common definition can “the regularity, stability, and repetitiveness of joint action”<sup>6)</sup> be maintained.

In chapter three, we address the third problem: the nature of human society is the one of unpredictable continual transformation. SI has emphasized that human society or joint action must be seen to have a career

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<sup>4)</sup> Blumer, H.G., 1969, *Symbolic Interactionism*, Prentice-Hall, p.20.

<sup>5)</sup> Blumer, 1969, p.70.

<sup>6)</sup> Blumer, 1969, p.71.

or a history; its career is generally orderly, fixed and repetitious, by virtue of its participants' common identification or definition in their joint action. The career of joint action must, however, also be seen to be open to many possibilities of uncertainty.

Why must joint action/society be understood as having the character of being "open to many possibilities of uncertainty"<sup>7</sup> ? To answer this question with the focus on the concept of "self-interaction", which, we attempt to prove, necessarily implies that continuous regularity, stability, and repetitiveness of joint actions that compose human society are actually, and logically, impossible. In other words, "a common definition" cannot, in practice, keep its given form continuously unchanged.

In SI, a condition in which a certain common definition is maintained implies a situation in which a certain significant symbol is maintained among interactants. This situation can be described as a state in which an individual sees a gesture he himself presents in the identical way in which it is seen by those to whom it is addressed. In order to maintain this state, the interactant who presents the gesture must interpret and define properly, through a process of self-interaction, the "two standpoints" of the other interactant/"alter ego" to whom the gesture is addressed. Moreover, the validity of his/her interpretation/definition must be continuously maintained. But this is impossible, because of the nature of the "alter ego" or "other".

As we have seen in chapter one, the "worlds" that exist for human beings are areas that consist only of "objects". Therefore "others", as they exist for each individual, must be included in the category/concept of "object" ("social object"). Objects are, as we have said, able to be described as a part of the world of reality that is seen by the individual from his/her perspectives. Therefore, it can be said that the object is, on one hand, a percept created by the individual, but at the same time it continues to exist undeniably as a portion of the world of reality. How, then, is the nature of the world of reality grasped? As clarified in chapter one, SI proposes that the world of reality to be interpreted by an actor has continuous possibilities of talking back to his/her interpretation/definition, and the actor can thereby know whether his/her interpretation has validity or not. If an individuals' interpretation is found out to be invalid, the given interpretation will be modified. This means that SI understands interpretation always has the possibility of being formed and re-formed from moment to moment.

From these grounds, it follows that the individual cannot continuously use the same interpretation/definition of a given object. Therefore, because the "other" is also categorized as an object and as part of the world of reality, it follows that the "other" which is to be interpreted by an actor has continuous possibilities of talking back to the actor's interpretation/definition; and it also follows that the individual cannot continuously give the same interpretation/definition to the "other" with whom the individual is engaged in interactions/joint actions. The "other" or "alter ego" for the individual exists as a "black box" (Luhmann, N.) forever.

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<sup>7</sup> Blumer, 1969, p.71.

In summary of the above, in SI any common definition must, as a matter of fact, be considered impossible to sustain a particular form forever. *Forever*, for the nature of the “other” (=“black boxness”) doesn’t allow an actor to continue to use the same interpretation/definition, or to confer a particular meaning through a process of self-interaction, forever. The “other” has continuous possibilities of talking back, and the resultant need of the actor to change or modify any given interpretation/definition (=meaning) endlessly persists. Hence, any common definition must inevitably be re-formed eventually, and hence, any joint action must also inevitably be re-formed eventually.

The final chapter concerns the problem of finding a suitable research methodology for examining “the standpoint of the actor”, as the means to testing empirically the SI model of society, that is, “the Dynamic Society”, laid out in the previous chapters.

In chapters one, two, and three, we clarified the SI model of human society. First and foremost, “human society” is conceptualized as a system of interlinked social interactions by interactants, and in reality human society exists only as “a real form of interactions”, i.e., “transactions” or “joint actions”. In SI, social interaction is the fundamental unit of society, which exposes the generic nature of “human society”. To understand society, we need only to study this “real form of interaction” (=transaction/joint action). This was the initial hypothesis of SI for the study of society.

Summarizing the model of social interaction described in the previous chapters, for SI social interaction is an interaction in which interactants, each having the nature of “black boxness” for other interactants, perform “taking into account of taking into account” as a form of self-interaction, in order to grasp/define properly both the “standpoint of the other” and “one’s own standpoint in the eyes of the other”. Thus social interaction is a social process in which each interactant must continue to guess two things i.e., “from what standpoints are others perceiving the world?” and “how are my perspectives being grasped by others?”, by the procedure of “taking into account of taking into account”. Additionally, because of the nature of “black boxness” which characterizes all interactants with respect to one another, the interactants are necessarily forced into redefining the situation, and as a result of this re-definition, their interactions or their joint actions are forced to change into yet another form. These possibilities of “change” continue *ad infinitum*.

We have discussed the conception of social interaction in the first three chapters of this article. This conception should be categorized as a “sensitizing concept” in terms of SI’s methodology. This means that this conception must not be taken as a self-evident truth or *a priori* assumption on which a grand theory can be built by a purely deductive approach, but must be understood as merely a hypothesis or tentative proposition whose validity must be tested empirically. The approach to empirical testing recommended by SI is as follows: “One moves out from a concept to the concrete distinctiveness of the instance, instead of embracing the instance in the abstract framework of the concept”<sup>8)</sup>.

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<sup>8)</sup> Blumer, 1969, p.149.



SI has promoted “naturalistic inquiry” as the ideal research method for the social sciences. This means a “*continuing interaction* between guiding ideas and empirical observation”<sup>91</sup>. The methodology of naturalistic inquiry is a continual testing and revising of the concepts with respect to the investigator’s subject of research through empirical observation. But “How can the investigator know whether or not the given concepts of the subject of research are valid?” That is, how does SI envisage the process of testing and revising? In SI terms, this is considered to be possible by way of the “resisting”, or talking back, from the “empirical world” under study to the concepts of the investigator (the occurrence of the “negative case”).

What, then, is the methodological position of the investigator when carrying out the naturalistic inquiry with the concepts of social interaction (“root images” of SI) laid out in chapters one, two and three? The “position” assumed is identical with the *approach from the “standpoint of the actor”*. The investigator must take on the same activity as that of the interactant described in SI theory.

The final chapter illustrates the problems, and the points to be kept in mind, when *actually* employing this approach to research.

The study of society from “the position of the actor” requires that the investigator takes on the role of the actor under study and sees “his/her own world from his/her standpoint”. The concept of “actor” embraces not only an individual, but also a *group*. In order to make this clear, SI often uses the term “acting unit” to refer to “actor”. The first problem is whether the “group” can be properly located in the category or concept of “acting unit”.

Whether the “acting unit” consists of an individual or a group, its activities must be equally understood as the products of its own interpretive processes. The assertion of SI is that even in cases where the “acting unit” represents a *group*, we must adopt the *approach from the standpoint of the actor* and “take the role of the acting unit”. However, our analysis makes it clear that SI does not explain persuasively and systematically how it is possible for the investigator to take the role of an *entire* group, and that the discussion above only provides that only an individual can be included in the category of “acting unit”, if we are to do the *approach from the standpoint of the actor*<sup>101</sup>.

The next problem, “Can we take the role of the acting unit *in the raw*?” is discussed below.

Supposing that social interactions occur between two interactants, then, in terms of our analysis, the two interactants are considered to be engaged in the “taking into account of taking into account” (a form of

<sup>91</sup> Blumer, H.G., 1977=1992, Comment on Lewis’ “The Classic American Pragmatists as Forerunners to Symbolic Interactionism”, Hamilton, P., (ed.), *George Herbert Mead Critical Assessments*, vol.2, sec.2, Routledge, p.154.

<sup>101</sup> According to Mamoru Funatsu, however, Blumer’s theory on “social problems” based on SI has a potential for making significant contributions to develop a macro theory of SI. See next two articles: Funatsu, M., 1990, Interpretative Approach to Social Problems, *The Study of Sociology*, 55, Tohoku Sociological Association, pp. 155-174; Blumer, 1971, Social Problems as Collective Behavior, *Social Problems*, 18: 298-306=2006, translated by Kuwabara, T. and Yamaguchi, K., H.G.Blumer, Social Problems as Collective Behavior, *Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 66, The Economic Society of Kagoshima University, pp. 41-55. In this translation by us, a brief examination as to relationships between Blumer’s theory on SI and Social Constructionism is included.

self-interaction) each other, in order to grasp the “standpoint of the other” and “one’s own standpoint in the eyes of the other”; and it is further considered that each of the two interactants has the nature of a “black boxness” for the other. So, when an investigator attempts to study social interaction from the standpoint of an actor, he/she must take into account the assumption of “black boxness” that the interactants can never know the real identity of the other, and also must build the research method or methodology compatible with this assumption. As a result, “delimiting an awareness context always requires that the sociologist ascertain independently the awareness of each interactant. The safest method is to obtain data, through observation or interview, from each interactant on his own state of awareness. To accept the word of only one informant is risky, even perhaps for the open awareness context”<sup>11</sup>.

It must also be borne in mind that an “investigator” who studies social interaction becomes one of *the actors or acting units* on the same level as the two interactants studied. So, an act of studying or a “research act” by the investigator must also be understood as *one of the interpretive processes*, and the interaction between the investigator and the investigated is, equally, located in the category of “symbolic interaction”; and even for the investigator the two interactants whose roles are under study also have the character of *black boxness*. For this reason, although the research act involves taking the standpoint of the actor, it never means taking *directly* the *standpoint in the raw*. The standpoint of the actor as taken by an investigator can only be the “reconstruction of constructions” (Naohito Tokugawa)<sup>12</sup>.

How, then, can the investigator relativize this “reconstruction of constructions” and test its validity? The obvious answer to this question derived from SI theory, that the investigator can do this in the light of talking back from an empirical world, is unsatisfactory. It is too incomplete for practical use in sociological research.

A major issue being to be dealt with in future work is to devise testing standards that can verify empirically the SI conception of social interaction or its model of society, namely, “the Dynamic Society”.

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<sup>11</sup> Glaser, B.G., and Strauss, A.L., 1964=1970, Awareness Contexts and Social Interaction, Stone, G.P., and Farberman, H.A., (ed.), *Social Psychology through Symbolic Interaction*, Xerox College Publishing, p.338.

<sup>12</sup> Tokugawa, N., 2001, The “Individual and Collaborative Character” of Narrative Actions, Kitamura, T., et al., (ed.), *The Renaissance of Human Beings in 21st century*, Hassakusha, p.129.